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Michele Dunne, Editor
Salma Waheedi, Assistant Editor

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Insights and Analysis

Arab States: Emerging Consensus to Muzzle Media

Marwan M. Kraidy

After years of rhetoric about the need for a pan-Arab satellite television framework, Arab information ministers on February 12, 2008 adopted a charter that provides the tools to penalize broadcasters who attack leaders or air socially unacceptable content. The charter is broad ranging, covering news, political shows, and entertainment—even sports programs. In the weeks before the emergency meeting in Cairo, the Egyptian and Saudi information ministers lobbied their colleagues to pass the document, prepared by a committee of experts during the preceding six months. Even Syria, currently engaged in a media war with Saudi Arabia over Lebanon, signed off on the charter.

While the charter's passage seemed sudden, momentum toward action against satellite media has been building since the 2006 Lebanon war. When hostilities broke out, Egyptian and Saudi leaders at first condemned Hizbollah's "adventurism," then back-pedaled in light of Hizbollah's resilience and the mounting civilian casualties of Israel's onslaught. In the meantime, Hizbollah's al-Manar television climbed to the top ten in pan-Arab ratings, and live talk-show hosts struggled to prevent callers from heaping verbal abuse on pro-U.S. Arab leaders. Though not criticized as harshly as the Saudi government, the Egyptian government has been contending with an increasingly media-savvy Muslim Brotherhood whose views are aired on al-Jazeera, Hamas's al-Aqsa television, and throughout the Arabic-language blogosphere. Thus placing political restrictions on Arab airwaves was a shared Saudi-Egyptian interest.

The resulting charter attempts to appeal to several constituencies. By penalizing content that allegedly promotes sexual activity and alcohol consumption, it placates socially conservative Islamists, including Egypt's Brotherhood, which for years has advocated such restrictions. By purporting to protect "Arab identity from the harmful effects of globalization," it appeals to Arab nationalists as well as Islamists. Finally, the charter has a populist provision, stipulating Arab viewers' rights to information, including the right to watch some sports competitions on free-to-air government channels even when commercial channels hold exclusivity agreements. In addition to reasserting the rights of state television channels, this gives the charter some street credibility with Arab publics.

The core of the charter is the prohibition of content that would "damage social harmony, national unity, public order, or traditional values"—echoing media laws in most Arab countries, virtually all of which have ambiguously worded language that penalizes criticism of leaders and thereby buttresses authoritarian rule. The ominous catchall provision against harming "national reputation" justifies a wide range of repressive measures. The charter also affirms current practice; several Arab states have revoked Arab satellite channels' licenses to report from their territories.

However consistent the charter may be with current laws and practices, implementation is likely to be uneven among Arab countries. Egypt and Saudi Arabia own Nilesat and Arabsat and can in theory disconnect undesirable channels. Although such actions carry political and business risks, Egypt has already demonstrated its intent to implement the charter by closing down the business channel al-Baraka on a flimsy pretext on February 24. But Qatar declined to sign the charter, citing potential conflict with its own laws, and the Lebanese Information Minister called the charter a "guiding, not binding" document. Journalist unions are up in arms, and many writers are expressing suspicion that the charter is intended to silence criticism of U.S. policy and align Arab countries further with the U.S.-Israel axis in order to counter the rise of Iran. Responding to these accusations, Saudi Information Ministry Director Abdullah al-Jasir explained that the charter "distinguishes between incitement to violence and resistance to occupation." Journalists are asking whether the charter will

be applied to foreign Arabic-language satellite channels such as the U.S. al-Hurra, the Kremlin's Russia Today, and Iran's al-'Alam. Also, commercial channels are likely to sue governments for infringing on their exclusive sports agreements.

It remains unclear whether the charter is merely a symbolic gesture or whether it constitutes a concrete step toward a repressive pan-Arab media policy regime. With over 400 channels peddling fortune-tellers, alternative medicines, Jihadi ideas, titillating bodies, and stock market schemes alongside more mainstream news and entertainment, a regulatory framework is not in itself a bad idea. But Arab governments' record on finding the fine line between preventing harmful content and protecting freedom of expression is dismal. With growing harassment and arrest of bloggers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, there is the troubling possibility of similarly sweeping charters regulating the Arab internet and mobile phones.

Syrian comedian Durayd Lahham once quipped that "the only Arab officials who can agree on things are interior ministers," who exchange information in order to harass each others' dissidents as well as terrorists. Journalists, intellectuals, and dissidents are now worried that although Arab regimes disagree on many issues, their information ministers are finding common ground on muzzling speech.

Marwan M. Kraidy is an expert on Arab media and Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication.

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Palestine: Can Fatah Survive?

Mouin Rabbani

With preparations accelerating, it seems increasingly likely that the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) will hold its Sixth General Conference during 2008. Yet given the advanced state of disintegration in which the movement finds itself, it may well be a case of too little too late. Simply put, Fatah's very survival now hangs in the balance.

Much has changed since Fatah held its Fifth General Conference in 1989. The movement's leader, Yasser Arafat, has departed the scene, along with a third of the twenty-one member Fatah Central Committee (FCC). Yet none have been replaced because the power to do so rests with the General Conference. The surviving members—though drawn from a society whose median age is well below 30—are over 65, often considerably older, and in several cases incapacitated by illness.

Moreover, Fatah in recent years has fragmented, not just into two or three rival camps but into multiple, competing power centers. These power centers (generally associated with individual leaders engaged in constantly shifting alliances) consist of networks based on patronage, shared history, geography, foreign sponsorship, ideology, policy, or various combinations of the above.

Simultaneously, Fatah has been struggling to cope with the most serious challenge yet to its supremacy within the Palestinian national movement by the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), a challenge in large part attributable to Fatah's strategic failure to end the Israeli occupation on the basis of a negotiated two-state settlement as well as its failures in governance since the Palestinian Authority (PA) was founded in 1994.

Organizational preparations for the General Conference rest with a committee led by the Tunis-based FCC member Abu Mahir Ghnaim, whose refusal to enter the occupied territories prior to their liberation has meant that preparations within the West Bank and Gaza Strip are the responsibility of Fatah's Department of Organization and Mobilization (*da'irat al-ta'bi'a wa-l tandhim*) currently headed by FCC member Ahmad Qurai (Abu Alaa), who replaced FCC member Hani al-Hassan in 2007. Another preparatory committee, led by Fatah Revolutionary Council (FRC) member and former PLO UN envoy Nasser al-Qidwa, has been charged with formulating the movement's political program.

The Organization and Mobilization Department has established a computerized database of the Fatah membership in the occupied territories and supervised a series of local, district, and regional elections throughout the West Bank to select Conference delegates. While this complex process has been surprisingly smooth, it forms only one of numerous challenges Fatah must overcome on the road to the General Conference.

One challenge consists of delegate criteria. Elected delegates chosen locally by Fatah members in the occupied territories and various exile communities represent only part of the Conference. FCC and Fatah Revolutionary Council members participate *ex officio*, and some have proposed that these be joined by current (and former) officials including elected Fatah Palestinian Legislative Council members, mayors, and PA ministers. An additional quota of between 35 and 51 percent of

delegates is set aside for members of the movement's military cadre, according to Fatah's by-laws. With no cap on the number of General Conference delegates, the meeting could easily be stacked in favor of delegates selected by the present leadership. More to the point, only the General Conference is empowered to alter the representational criteria, while such alterations are considered essential to the Conference's success.

A second challenge concerns the venue of the Conference. It is extremely unlikely that Fatah delegates, including those from the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria, will be able to assemble in Ramallah. Some have therefore proposed holding three separate events – in Gaza, Ramallah, and an Arab state – to be linked by video conference or held successively. Others have countered that this would be politically dangerous and instead argued for a single event to be held in the al-Arish in Egyptian Sinai or on the Jordanian coast of the Dead Sea.

A third issue to be confronted concerns the movement's political program. An increasing number of Fatah leaders and rank-and-file members have come to the conclusion that the movement needs to define itself and its strategic objectives clearly in order not only to meet the challenge of Hamas but to lay the basis for organizational coherence and discipline. Yet to do so will almost certainly precipitate defections by the disenchanted and perhaps even cause a split within Fatah. While al-Qidwa easily ranks among the movement's most able and sophisticated minds, the challenge could well prove insurmountable.

Finally, there is a widespread feeling that the movement cannot go to a General Conference in its current weakened state, but needs some real achievement, such as concrete progress in negotiations with Israel or at least the prospect of an imminent agreement. Yet this is highly unlikely at best. One prominent FRC member expressed concern that President Mahmoud Abbas "is pushing for a quick achievement as he did with the 2006 elections; on the formal level it looks like a success, but you are risking very negative consequences."

Ultimately, the challenge of the Sixth General Conference is to ensure that a successful outcome—including a new leadership structure—is decided and agreed by the main power centers in advance. Yet the formulas for doing so do not presently exist, and require a General Conference to be created. On this basis some of the movement's leaders are proposing to hold an (admittedly unconstitutional) interim conference that would seek to finesse the by-laws in a manner that would allow for a purposeful meeting.

The stakes are extremely high. If Fatah fails to hold the General Conference—and in the process to make the necessary leadership reforms and formulate a meaningful national program—in 2008, it is probably finished as a movement. Despite the rise of Hamas, Fatah remains the spinal cord of the Palestinian national movement, and its disintegration could only mean further Palestinian paralysis.

Mouin Rabbani is an independent Middle East analyst currently based in Amman, Jordan.

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Morocco: The PJD between Inclusion and Cooptation

Mustapha al-Khalfi

The disappointing showing of the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) in the September 2007 parliamentary elections in Morocco has sparked questions about the party's future course. Observers wondered whether the Islamist PJD, having won only 46 of 325 seats (despite widespread expectations that it would take at least 70) would resort to the strategies employed by other Islamist groups, such as boycotting elections, abandoning political participation, or even engaging in clandestine activities. Foreign observers speculated over the fate of Secretary General Saad Eddin al-Uthmani and potential threats to his position from the party's radical wing.

A few months down the road, the PJD has made clear its commitment to the democratic path, resisting the temptation to withdraw from politics to signal its grievances over the political and electoral process. Moreover, the PJD has begun an internal dialogue to revise its position on key issues, leading to renewed focus on demanding real constitutional reforms and questioning the government's laxity in combating electoral corruption.

The PJD's response is partly due to the party's interpretation of its electoral loss. First, the party believes that several factors conspired against an electoral victory. Voter turnout was low: only 37 percent voted, 19 percent of whom spoiled their ballots. Electoral districts were redrawn in an attempt to limit the party's electoral chances. New voter registries were only slightly revised but not fully updated, and voter registration cards were not well distributed. Last but not least, vote buying and electoral violence remained unchecked. These factors weakened the party's electoral showing, but did not diminish its popularity. In the end, the PJD still gained the largest number of votes (more than 520,000), though not seats. It

was not invited to join the government formed by the Istiqlal Party; from the point of view of the PJD, this saved the party from participating in a weak government with a limited capacity to implement a political program.

According to the party's assessment of its electoral performance, the PJD lost more than 10 seats as a result of an administrative and political conspiracy against it in certain districts and of the party's inability to cover all voting precincts (more than 38,000). The PJD may also have lost votes due to voter concerns regarding the party's religious identity and its reluctance to state clearly its willingness to serve in government.

Apart from the elections themselves, many in the PJD believe that the low voter turnout is provoking widespread discussions in Morocco about the need to reclaim the integrity of the political and electoral process. This in turn could set the stage for a new wave of democratic reforms in which the PJD would want to participate. The party's commitment to pluralism and adoption of a moderate course in dealing with other political actors have thus enabled it to handle what many see as a psychological defeat.

Despite its ability to manage and explain this defeat, however, the PJD has nonetheless launched a process of internal critique and dialogue ahead of its planned conference in July 2008. Among the key questions the PJD must face is the relationship between ruling regimes and moderate Islamist movements, which are trapped between inclusion and cooptation. On the one hand, ruling regimes have resorted to gradual inclusion of Islamists in politics in an attempt to curb the popularity of radical Islamist groups. On the other hand, ruling regimes employ limiting tactics in order to combat the rising popularity of moderate Islamists and their potential threat to the balance of power.

In the past, the party has advanced a two-fold solution to the problem of inclusion versus cooptation: it participated in elections in a limited fashion but declined to join governments. The PJD participated in nearly half of the electoral districts in the 1997 parliamentary elections, 56 out of 91 districts in 2002, and only 18 percent of electoral districts in the 2003 municipal elections. It refused to participate in governments in 1998 and 2002, preferring a limited but effective parliamentary presence. This strategy expired with the September 2007 elections, in which the party ran candidates in all electoral districts and its leaders appeared ready to embrace governmental responsibility. In retrospect, it is clear that the Moroccan political context was not ready for such a transformation.

The return of constitutional reform as a priority in PJD rhetoric reflects a new attempt to overcome the inclusion/cooptation conundrum. Whether or not it will be adopted as the main response to the Islamists' perennial dilemma will become clearer at the upcoming party conference in July.

Mustapha al-Khalfi is a Moroccan researcher. Dina Bishara translated this article from Arabic.

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Iraq: The Status of National Reconciliation

Ali Latif

National reconciliation has been a top priority for all concerned with aiding Iraq's path toward economic and political stability. But what exactly does it mean in the Iraqi context? Since the end of the war, several distinct and sometimes competing issues have developed, requiring meaningful dialogue among all sections of Iraq's population. The first is the administration of justice for the crimes of the Baath regime, which has not been fully addressed despite Saddam Hussein's much publicized trial and execution. The balance between meaningful justice to victims and post-war stability has yet to be struck.

The post-war picture laid bare three communities with seemingly divergent visions about their own future and that of their country. The Kurds, mindful of many years of persecution, were set on cementing their autonomy and looked toward possible independence. The previously marginalized and repressed Shi'a looked to assert their majority status and prevent a return to minority rule. The Sunna, largely in denial of the new Iraq, looked on in dread and feared retribution by the Shi'a and Kurds, a contingency that would invariably lead to the breakup of the country. Added to this are previously simmering but dormant tensions between the tribal and the urban, the religious and secular, and rich and poor that have evolved across as well as within ethnic fault-lines.

Given this complex picture, a national reconciliation initiative amidst a brutal insurgency and escalating sectarian conflict was never going to be easy. Prime Minister Maliki's National Reconciliation Framework, launched in June 2006, attempted to address issues such as the de-Baathification law, disarmament of the militias, and reform of public institutions. The twenty-four point plan was right in addressing issues across all levels of Iraqi society from the political elite to the grass-roots in order to forge genuine national reconciliation.

Two years on, however, even in a much improved security context, progress has been fitful and disjointed. The National

Unity Government, designed to bring all factions into the fold, fell victim to walkouts from various parties, leaving only the United Iraqi Alliance and Kurdish parties. Nevertheless the Iraqi parliament, despite the disputes and scarce attendance, has managed to pass several vital pieces of legislation that will aid the process of national reconciliation; namely those of de-Baathification, the national budget. The recent impasse in legislation on provincial powers is certainly a setback, but the current lack of consensus should not take away from the fact that parliament is still the venue for this debate and the ultimate vehicle for national reconciliation.

While the political process in Baghdad has been frustratingly slow, reconciliation amongst the political elite is at an acceptable level. This top-down approach, however, has failed to initiate reconciliation at the lower levels. Ordinary Iraqis faced with daily hardships feel far removed from the political elite in the Green Zone. Ministries and public bodies still function largely as they did during the previous regime, with patronage networks that now run along ethnic rather than Baath party lines. The numerous cases of sectarian bias from the police and army have further eroded public trust.

The altered composition of the previously mixed areas in and around Baghdad has been the most visible breakdown in communal relations. Despite the dramatic decrease in violence, people are reluctant to return to their homes, fearing they will find them occupied and wary of turning to authorities that run along sectarian lines. The situation of refugees is of grave concern, incubating resentment that will add to the difficulty of national reconciliation.

The decision of tribes in central Iraq to stand against al-Qaeda and work with U.S. forces has greatly assisted in improving security. These armed militias, however, are less cooperative with the Iraqi army and government, raising concerns about their future within the Iraqi state. Similarly, the ceasefire declared by Shi'i leader Muqtada al-Sadr has allowed Iraqi and U.S. forces to target the rogue elements of the Mahdi Army. But the issue of the Mahdi Army itself, as well as of other militias, remains unresolved—as illustrated by the collective sigh of relief that followed al-Sadr's recent decision to extend his ceasefire.

In addressing the major challenges to national reconciliation that persist beneath the more-visible political agreements in Baghdad, the judiciary will have a pivotal role. A robust and independent judiciary that has the necessary legal framework and law enforcement partners will be in the best position to address sources of sectarian and ethnic tension in public institutions, disputes over property, and the dismantling of the militias.

Ali Latif is a scholar at the Baghdad Institute for Public Policy.

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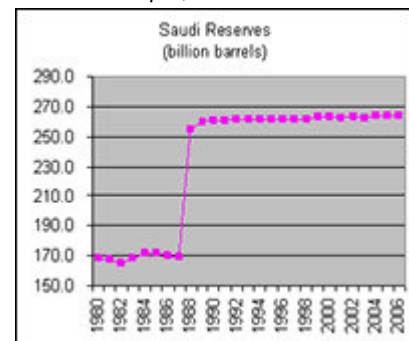
Arab States: Oil Reserves and Transparency

Giacomo Luciani

Do Arab governments deliberately announce misleading information about petroleum reserves, for political or economic reasons? One can only estimate, not truly measure, oil reserves in the ground, and reserve estimates can vary depending on the criteria adopted. A very conservative approach—one that is used by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission—includes only reserves that almost certainly exist and can be produced with current technology. The Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE), on the other hand, advocates a probabilistic approach, classifying reserves by the probability that they are extractable: a 90 percent probability, a 50 percent probability, or a 10 percent probability.

Oil-producing countries publish estimates of their reserves without clearly stating the criteria used. This does not mean necessarily that such estimates are unrealistic, but simply that we do not know exactly what they mean and how they compare with other world reserve estimates. Some estimates are clearly conservative. For example, Saudi Arabia has a preference for downplaying its reserves for tactical reasons, such as containing outside pressure to increase production beyond the level that the Kingdom is comfortable with. It has, therefore, followed a practice of announcing, year after year, reserve increments that almost exactly equal the amount of oil that was extracted during the year, leaving reserves unchanged (except for a quantum re-evaluation announced in 1989—see graph, data from BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2007). This is a transparent fabrication, and is meant as such. The message, nevertheless, is clear.

In other cases, countries sometimes announce sudden increases in their reserve estimates, arousing suspicions as to whether such estimates are truly justified. Some countries have an interest in inflating their reserves in order to obtain larger production quotas from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). OPEC quotas, however, have lost most of their importance in recent years, as some members are not able to fill their quotas and others exceed them. In any case, OPEC quotas are not



necessarily proportional to reserves. Doubts about the true extent of reserves arise not only in international circles but also in domestic politics. In Kuwait, for example, the parliament has repeatedly asked in vain to be briefed about reserves, adding to suspicions about announced estimates.

One possible solution to the credibility problem would be for producing countries to have their reserves independently certified. Independent estimates do exist. Information Handling Services Energy Group (formerly Petroconsultant) maintains an extensive database and arrives at its own estimates of reserves, sometimes quite different from those published by the producing countries.

Ultimately, however, independent estimates are unlikely to be a panacea. Estimating reserves is an art, not a science, and it is based on information that the producer alone possesses. Any third party called to certify reserves inevitably depends on information received from the producer, and its experience of the field and operating conditions locally will, by definition, be inferior to that of the producer. Hence, any estimate provided by an independent party could be inferior to that offered by the producer.

In the end, the importance of reserve numbers is probably exaggerated. They are useful as a broad measure of the potential and significance of each country in the international oil arena, but the pecking order is unlikely to change much.

Do reserve estimates influence a country's production policy? It is at best a tenuous link; producing countries consider changing their economic policies, such as opening doors to international investment and diversifying their economies more aggressively, if their production starts declining. Production levels will be influenced more by the perceived convenience of producing more today and less in the future than by measures of reserves. High oil prices should justify increases in the estimates of reserves (marginal oil that was not recoverable under low prices becomes so), and at the same time they discourage higher production, either through deliberate shut in, or, more likely, through the adoption of policies that result in lower production. The only matter that can be predicted easily is that disputes and debates about reserve estimates will continue until the last drop of oil is extracted.

Giacomo Luciani is Director of the Gulf Research Center (GRC) in Geneva.

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News and Views

Palestine: Gaza Escalation; Population Growth; Villages Demolished

Israel launched a new incursion into Gaza on March 4 following renewed rocket attacks. Israel had pulled its ground troops out of northern Gaza on March 3 after days of coordinated operations in which more than 100 Palestinians were killed. Israel says that most of those killed were armed militants, but Palestinian officials say that more than half were civilians, including several children. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas initially cut off peace talks with Israel in response to the incursions, but in a March 4 joint [press conference](#) with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is concluding a visit to the region, Abbas confirmed his intention to resume talks with Israel.

Nearly 4,500 Palestinians formed a human chain in the Gaza Strip on February 24 in protest of the Israeli blockade on Gaza. Israel had put troops on alert along the frontier and threatened to open fire if protesters tried to surge across the border. The event, organized by Hamas and allied activists, ended peacefully two hours later. Click [here](#) for more details.

The Palestinian population in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem grew by about 30 percent in the last decade, according to data published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics on February 9. The census numbers for 2007 show a total of 2.345 million Palestinians in the West Bank, 1.4 million in the Gaza Strip, and 208,000 in East Jerusalem. Click [here](#) for more details and statistics.

The Israeli army continued on February 6 the demolition of two Palestinian villages in the West Bank. The Israeli army has declared most of the Jordan Valley, where the villages of Humsa and Hadidiya are situated, as a closed military area from which the local Palestinian population is barred. The evacuation of the villages began in April 2007 and has left dozens of Palestinians homeless and without access to running water or electricity. Click [here](#) for a statement by Amnesty International.

The Israeli cabinet approved on February 6 the construction of a reinforced fence along its border with Egypt to stop Palestinian militants reaching Israel from the Sinai desert. The measure was ratified in a security cabinet meeting following the temporary breach of the Gaza-Egypt border in January and a February 5 suicide bombing that killed one woman in the southern Israeli town of Dimona. Click [here](#) for more information.

Arab States: Arab League Summit

The [Arab League](#) plans to hold its twentieth annual summit in Syria on March 29-30. Syria is keen for high-level representation at the summit, but Arab divisions over Lebanon have cast a shadow over the meeting. Arab media sources report that Saudi King Abdullah and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak may not attend if a Lebanese president is not elected. President Mubarak said in a [statement](#) to Bahrain Television on February 25 that Syria was part of the problem in Lebanon, and called on Damascus to help resolve the crisis before the summit. Meanwhile, Arab foreign ministers started a series of meetings in Cairo on March 5 to prepare the summit agenda.

Lebanon: Presidential Vote Delay; Sectarian Clashes

On February 25, the Lebanese parliament postponed for the fifteenth time the session to elect a new president. It is now scheduled for March 11. Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa left Lebanon on February 9 after failing to break the deadlock between the Western and Saudi-backed majority and the pro-Syria opposition. The two sides agreed on Army Commander General Michel Suleiman as president, but are now divided on the composition of a new government. Lebanon has been without a president since the expiration of pro-Syrian Emile Lahoud's term on November 23, 2007.

On February 14, thousands of Lebanese took to the streets in two separate rallies: Hizbollah supporters lined the streets of Beirut to watch the funeral procession of Hizbollah militant Imad Mughniyah, killed February 12 in a car bombing in Damascus. During the funeral, Hizbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah [warned](#) that the group is ready for "open war" with Israel. Supporters of the government meanwhile gathered in Martyrs Square to mark the third anniversary of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. Violent street clashes later erupted in several mixed Sunni-Shi'i areas of Beirut on February 16, leaving at least fourteen people injured. On February 12, Lebanese prosecutors charged nineteen soldiers, including three officers, in the case of the fatal shooting of seven Shi'i protestors in Beirut on January 27.

Egypt: Muslim Brotherhood Arrests; New Torture Cases; Re-conversion Decision

An Egyptian military court adjourned on February 26 the trial of forty Muslim Brotherhood leaders, including second Deputy Guide Khairat al-Shatir, until March 25. The Brotherhood leaders face charges of membership in a banned organization; reports differ on whether previous charges of money laundering have been dropped. Egyptian authorities also arrested more than 120 Brotherhood members between February 14 and 28. Some 400 Brotherhood members are now in detention, most of them without charge. The Brotherhood says a continued crackdown by the authorities is aimed at preventing its members from running in local elections in April. Click [here](#) for more information.

On February 25, an Egyptian Court appointed Egypt's first female *ma'zun* (justice of the peace) to perform and register marriages. Egypt appointed its first female judge in 2003. Click [here](#) for more details.

The Ministry of Information banned the distribution of four foreign newspapers on February 19, the day on which the papers reprinted controversial Danish cartoons deemed offensive to the Prophet Muhammad. The four banned newspapers were Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Welt*, the London-based *Observer*, and the New York-based *Wall Street Journal*. Click [here](#) for more information.

On February 11, an appeals court in Cairo upheld the conviction of al-Jazeera documentary producer Howayda Taha for "harming Egypt's reputation" due to her work on a program about torture in Egyptian prisons, but overturned her conviction on the charge of "spreading false news." The court struck down the six-month prison sentence she received in May, but upheld a fine of 20,000 Egyptian pounds (U.S. \$3,607). Click [here](#) for more details.

A Cairo Criminal Court postponed on February 11 the trial of four police officers charged with torture until April 13. The police officers are charged with torturing a prisoner to death in July 2002. In a separate case, Egyptian prosecutors charged on February 9 two policemen with murdering a man by throwing him off a balcony in Cairo in the latest high profile case of suspected police abuse. Five policemen have been convicted and sentenced to jail on torture charges since November 2007.

The Egypt Supreme Administrative Court ruled on February 10 in favor of allowing twelve Christian converts to Islam to reconvert to Christianity. The ruling overturned an April 2007 lower court decision that upheld the government policy of refusing to allow the converts to change mandatory national identification cards to reflect their reconversion. Click [here](#) for more details.

A February 5 Human Rights Watch [statement](#) called on the Egyptian government to overturn the convictions of four men for the “habitual practice of debauchery,” and to free four others who are currently detained on similar charges. The human rights organization also called on authorities to end arbitrary arrests based on HIV status and to take steps to end prejudice and misinformation about HIV/AIDS. A recent wave of arrests of homosexuals began in October 2007, when police stopped two men having an altercation on a street in central Cairo.

Iraq: Legislative Progress

On February 27, Iraq’s Presidency Council ratified two key draft laws, the General Amnesty Law and the 2008 Budget Law, but rejected the draft Provincial Powers Law and returned it to parliament for revisions. The Provincial Powers Law defines the relationship between Baghdad and provincial authorities, and is a key step before a date can be set for provincial elections. The General Amnesty Law grants amnesty to thousands of detainees in Iraqi and U.S. custody. Parliament approved all three bills on Feb. 14 in what was seen as a major legislative breakthrough and a boost for reconciliation among Iraq’s divided communities. The main Sunni political party, the Accordance Front, said the amnesty law was an important step in bringing about its return to the central government. The party quit the government in August and made repeated demands for the release of prisoners as part of the condition for its return. Click [here](#) for the laws in Arabic.

President of the Iraqi Journalists Union Shihab al-Tamimi died on February 27 from injuries he sustained from a targeted shooting in Baghdad four days earlier. The attackers were not identified. In 2007, more than twenty-five journalists and media assistants were kidnapped in Iraq. A total of 208 have been killed in connection with their work since the start of the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Click [here](#) for more information.

Kuwait: Mughniyah Mourning; Segregation Controversy; Internet Law

Kuwait’s Popular Action Parliamentary Bloc expelled on February 19 two of its members, Adnan Abdulsamad and Ahmed Lari, for publicly mourning Hizbollah militant Imad Mughniya as a martyr. The bloc condemned the two MPs for participation in the rally to mourn Mughniyah, “who brutally killed two Kuwaitis during the [1988] hijacking” of a Kuwaiti plane. The two MPs remain in the legislature but face prospective lawsuits by Kuwaiti citizens. Click [here](#) for more information.

Controversy over gender segregation returned to the forefront in Kuwait after liberal MPs submitted a draft bill on February 5 to allow coeducation. Kuwait’s first university segregation law, which required the public system to be segregated, was passed in 1996 and implemented in 2001. The second law, which requires private universities to be segregated, was passed in 2000 and has not yet been fully implemented due to the high cost of building separate facilities for men and women. Islamist MPs insist that gender segregation is required by Islamic law and are campaigning for a full implementation. A senior liberal MP, Ali al-Rashid, reportedly received death threats over the proposal. Click [here](#) for more information.

Reporters without Borders issued a [statement](#) on February 11 calling on the Emir of Kuwait to clarify a proposed draft law for regulating the internet. Minister of Communication and Islamic Affairs Abdulla al-Muhailbi announced on February 6 that the cabinet would soon propose a law that would allow the government to monitor and regulate websites and blogs. Click [here](#) for more information.

UAE: Cabinet Reshuffle; Green City

UAE Prime Minister and Dubai ruler Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktum announced a new cabinet on February 17, appointing new economic, foreign trade, and labor ministers and doubling to four the number of female ministers. There was no change in the key ministries of energy, foreign affairs, or interior. The prime minister also holds the defense portfolio. Click [here](#) for the new cabinet line-up.

On February 10, Abu Dhabi announced the beginning of a \$22 billion project to build what it called “the world’s first zero-carbon, zero-waste, and car-free city.” Masdar city, which will take an estimated eight years to build, is planned to be home to 50,000 people and 1,500 businesses. The ambitious plans include powering the city by solar energy and establishing a transportation system consisting of travel pods running on magnetic tracks. Abu Dhabi also plans to become home to the world’s largest hydrogen power plant. Click [here](#) for more information.

Bahrain: Calls to Release Activists

On February 25, fifty-five local, regional, and international human rights organizations issued a [call](#) to Bahraini King Hamad to release demonstrators and human rights activists and to refrain from torturing detainees. Bahrain is currently detaining some fifty activists arrested after December 2007 demonstrations in which one protestor was killed. Human Rights Watch issued a [statement](#) on February 16 calling on the Bahraini government to investigate allegations of torture and abuse of political detainees.

Libya: Ministries Abolished

On March 4, Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi announced his intention to dissolve the country's existing administrative structure and disburse oil revenue directly to the people. The plan includes abolishing all ministries, except those of defense, internal security, and foreign affairs, and departments implementing strategic projects. Qadhafi has made at least three similar announcements in the past, the most recent of which was in March 2000, when he declared the elimination of twelve government ministries. Click [here](#) for more information.

Tunisia: Comedian Jailed

A Tunisian court sentenced comedian Hedia Ould Baballah on February 4 to one year in prison and a fine of 1000 dinars (U.S. \$800) for possession of narcotics. At the hearing, Baballah denied any knowledge of the drugs and alleged that there was a police conspiracy against him in connection with his controversial political satire. Baballah had been performing a skit in which he imitated President Ben Ali. Click [here](#) for more information.

Morocco: Islamist Party Banned; Moroccan Jailed for Impersonating Prince Online

The Moroccan government issued a decision on February 20 to ban the al-Badil al-Hadari (Civilized Alternative) Islamist Party over allegations of terrorism. The Party's President, Mustafa Mutassim, was among thirty-two people arrested on February 19 and accused of planning to assassinate several top army officers, government ministers, and Moroccan Jews. Click [here](#) for more details.

A Casablanca court convicted on February 22 an IT engineer for "modifying and falsifying information technology data and usurping an official's identity," because he posted a fictitious profile of Moroccan Prince Moulay Rachid on Facebook. He was sentenced to three years in prison and ordered to pay a fine of 10,000 Moroccan dirhams (U.S. \$1,320). Click [here](#) for more information.

Sudan: Cabinet Reshuffle

Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir announced on February 14 a cabinet reshuffle that replaced twelve ministers, mostly from the National Congress Party, which rules the country jointly with the southern Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Analysts considered the shuffle an attempt to appease SPLM officials who objected to certain ministers. Minister of Justice Muhammad al-Mardhi lost his post in the wake of heavy criticism for his handling of an alleged coup attempt involving former presidential assistant Mubarak al-Fadil. Controversial Minister of Interior al-Zuhair Bahir Tara was demoted to the post of Agriculture Minister. Click [here](#) for more details.

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Upcoming Political Events

- Egypt: Arab League foreign ministers meeting, March 5, 2008
- Lebanon: Parliament will attempt again to elect a president , March 11, 2008
- Syria: Arab League Summit, March 29-30, 2008
- Egypt: Local elections, April 8, 2008
- Qatar: Parliamentary elections, June 2008

Views from the Arab Media

Several commentators focus on freedom of expression issues:

- In a February 28 [article](#) in the electronic daily *Elaph*, Iraqi writer Imad al-Abadi laments the death of the head of Iraq's Journalist Union Shihab al-Tamimi, calling it the latest in an organized campaign of attacks on freedom of the press in Iraq. He adds that Iraq has been hijacked by political rivals, parliament blocs, and militants who are passing their divisions down to civil society and are intolerant of independent journalism.
- Egyptian writer Mai 'Azzam criticizes in a February 28 [article](#) in the independent Egyptian daily *al-Masry al-Youm* the decision of Egypt's Minister of Information to ban temporarily the circulation of four foreign newspapers that published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. She likens banning the papers to the Spanish Inquisition, adding

that Muslims should accept that freedom of speech means that not everything that is published will be in line with their religious views.

- The February 19 [episode](#) of al-Jazeera's "al-Ittijaah al-Mu'akis" (The Opposite Direction) debated the charter adopted by Arab countries to regulate satellite broadcasting. Algerian Islamist activist and academic Ahmed Bin Muhammad argued that the charter is another step toward suppressing freedom of speech in the Arab world, as "illegitimate" Arab leaders refuse to listen to any calls for reform. Editor-in-Chief of Tunisian newspaper *al-Mulahiz* argued that Arab countries need a media strategy and that the charter is necessary to regulate the current "chaos" of satellite broadcasting.

Several articles discuss the upcoming Arab League summit:

- In a February 26 [article](#) in Kuwait's *al-Siyassa*, Kuwaiti writer Ahmed al-Jarallah contends that the summit must be cancelled as it will only lead to further Arab fragmentation. He criticizes Syrian interferences in Lebanon and adds that a meeting cannot lead to any reconciliation as long as Syria's actions continue to jeopardize regional stability.
- Saudi writer Abdulrahman al-Rashid contends in a February 26 [article](#) in pan-Arab *Asharq al-Awsat* that Syria is making yet another strategic mistake by treating the Arab League summit as a public relations event without taking any serious positive steps to end the political stalemate in Lebanon. According to al-Rashid, the upcoming summit will only result in further deterioration in intra-Arab relations given what he calls Syria's obstruction of any reconciliation attempts in Lebanon.
- In a February 18 [editorial](#) in Syria's *Teshreen*, Syrian writer Issam Dari contends that Syria is determined to make the Arab League summit a success and strive to counter forces that are hostile to Arab unity. He criticizes Arab leaders for cooperating with the United States in implementing anti-Arab schemes that aim to divide the Arabs further.

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Read On

Recent publications on **Iraq** include:

- ["The Situation in Iraq: A Briefing from the Battlefield,"](#) by Anthony Cordesman (Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 13, 2008).
- ["Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge,"](#) (International Crisis Group, Middle East Report no. 72, February 7, 2008).
- ["Nation Building in a War Zone: The U.S. Record in Iraq, 2003-2007,"](#) by Mohamed El-Khawas (*Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1, Winter 2008, 42-62).
- ["Impediments to Stability in Iraq: The Illusive Economic Dimension,"](#) by Robert Looney (*Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, February 2008).
- ["Harsh Readjustment: The Sunnis and the Political Process in Contemporary Iraq,"](#) by Ronen Zeidel (*Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, February 2008).

New publications on **Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict** include:

- ["Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: American Leadership in the Middle East"](#) by Daniel C. Kurtzer and Scott B. Lasensky

(United States Institute of Peace, February 2008).

- “[Disengagement and the Frontiers of Zionism](#),” by Darryl Li (Middle East Report Online, February 16, 2008).
- In “[The Road out of Gaza](#),” Nathan Brown proposes an international strategy to restore Palestinian institutions, encourage a Fatah– Hamas agreement, and emphasize regional diplomacy. (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Outlook No. 39, February 15, 2008). Click [here](#) for Arabic.
- [Qira’at fi al-mashhad al-filastini: ‘an ‘arafat wa oslo wa haqq al-’awda wa ilgha’ al-mithaq](#) (*Readings on the Palestinian Scene: Arafat, Oslo, the Right to Return, and Cancelling the Charter*), by Bilal al-Hassan (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 2008).

Several new publications focus on **Lebanon**:

- “[Facing the Abyss: Lebanon’s Deadly Political Stalemate](#),” by Mona Yacoubian (United States Institute of Peace, February 2008).
- “[Lebanon 2006: Unfinished War](#),” by Jonathan Spyer (*Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, February 2008).
- “[Flooding South Lebanon: Israel’s Use of Cluster Munitions in Lebanon in July and August 2006](#)” (Human Rights Watch, February 17, 2008). Click [here](#) for Arabic.

Several new publications discuss **Islamist politics**:

- “[The Politics of Engagement between Islam and the Secular State: Ambivalences of ‘Civil Society’](#)” by Berna Turam (*The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 59, no. 1, February 2008, 259-81).
- “[Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi: Portrait of a Leading Islamic Thinker](#),” by Ana Soage (*Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, February 2008).
- “[The Relationship Between Traditional and Contemporary Islamist Political Thought](#),” by Sherko Kirmanj (*Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, February 2008).
- [The First Islamic Republic: Development and Disintegration of Islamism in the Sudan](#), by Abdullahi Gallab (Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

Other new publications discuss the **impact of outside powers on the region**:

- In “[The New Middle East](#),” Marina Ottaway, Nathan Brown, Amr Hamzawy, Karim Sadjadpour, and Paul Salem argue that the United States needs to abandon the illusion that it can reshape the region to suit its interests (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2008).
- “[Does the UN have a Role in Iraq?](#)” by Thomas R. Pickering (*Survival*, vol. 50, no. 1, February 2008, 133-42).
- “[Securing the Future: Europe’s Agenda for a More Peaceful Neighbourhood](#),” by Almut Moller and Christian-Peter Hanelt (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung Discussion Paper, January 2008).
- [U.S. Foreign Policy and Islamist Politics](#), by Ahmad Moussalli (University Press of Florida, January 2008).
- “[The Role of Migration in Foreign Aid Policies: The Case of Spain and Morocco](#),” by Joan Lacomba and Alejandra Boni (*International Migration*, vol. 46, no. 1, March 2008, 123-50).

- The February issue of *Araa' (Opinions)*, published by the Gulf Research Center, includes analysis of U.S. policies toward the Gulf region and foreign influences on Gulf security and defense policies.
- “Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb: The “Newest” Front in the War on Terror,” by Anthony Celso, and “Nation Building in a War Zone: The U.S. Record in Iraq, 2003-2007,” by Mohamed El-Khawas (*Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1, Winter 2008, 80-96).

Other publications discuss **reform-related developments** in various countries:

- *Dreams and Shadows: The Future of the Middle East*, by Robin Wright (Penguin Press, February 28, 2008) discusses changes in politics, media, and civil society as observed by an American journalist who has reported on the region for over 30 years.
- “Middle East and North Africa Reform: Rooted in Economic and Political Ground,” by John Sullivan and Anna Nadgrodkiewicz (Center for International Economic Enterprise, Economic Reform Issue Paper no. 0804, February 2008).
- *The Road Not Traveled: Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa* (World Bank, MENA Development Report, February 4, 2008).
- *Dissent and Reform in the Arab World: Empowering Democrats*, edited by Michael Rubin, Danielle Pletka, and Jeffrey Azarva (American Enterprise Institute, February 13, 2008).
- In “The Two Faces of Saudi Arabia,” Mai Yamani contrasts the Saudi regime’s imaginative interventions in foreign affairs with its immobility in the face of deepening divisions at home (*Survival*, vol. 50, no. 1, February 2008, 143-56).
- “Design of the Qatar National Research Fund: An Overview of the Study Approach and Key Recommendations” (RAND Qatar Policy Institute, February 20, 2008).
- The February issue of *al-Mustaqbal al-'arabi (Arab Future)*, published by the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut, includes analysis of gender in Arab culture, the knowledge economy in North African countries, and the evolving role of Sunni tribes in Iraq.
- The February issue of *Malaf al-ahram al-istratigi (Al-Ahram Strategic File)*, published by the Cairo-based al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, discusses the Sunni *Sahwa* movement in Iraq, fluctuations in oil prices, and women’s empowerment in the United Arab Emirates.
- *Taqrir al-ittijahat al-iqtisadiya al-istratijiya 2008 (Strategic Economic Directions Report 2008)*, also published by the al-Ahram Center, analyzes the performance of Arab economies in 2007 and includes a special report on the Egyptian economy.

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